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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1005)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting 113 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

This morning we continue our study of Bill C-76, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other acts and to make certain consequential amendments.

We are pleased to be joined by Leslie Seidle, Research Director from the Institute for Research on Public Policy; Nicolas Lavellée, Strategic Adviser, from Citoyenneté jeunesse; and Michael Morden, Research Director from the Samara Centre for Democracy.

Thank you for being here this morning.

I'll now turn the floor over to Mr. Seidle for his opening comments.

Dr. Leslie Seidle (Research Director, Institute for Research on Public Policy, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to come before you today.

You have a huge bill in front of you. I'm going to dig down or at least somewhat down in one area, the limits on the spending by third parties prior to and during the official election period. This is an area on which I've done research in the past and recently did a fairly large comparative report. It's also one of the major issues that were addressed in the early nineties by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, often known as the Lortie commission, on which I served as senior research coordinator.

I'll start with the third party limits during the writ period.

At present, the limit on advertising expenses for a third party nationally is $214,350, of which no more than $4,287 can be spent in a particular riding. The bill you have in front of you will expand the scope of spending, subject to limits, to include partisan activity expenses and election survey expenses, in addition to the advertising expenses that have been covered since 2000. In consequence, the limits have been raised considerably according to the backgrounder that was released when the bill was tabled. The new national limit on third party spending is estimated at around $500,000 for 2019. The level that's printed in the bill, $350,000, is adjusted for inflation from 2000, not from now. I find it reasonable to expand the scope of third party limits because the additional activities, such as surveys, are linked to, and indeed may even support, third party election advertising. The level of the new limits also seems reasonable to me.

There's a related amendment that limits the writ period to 50 days, and this will mean that, for political parties and candidates, a pro-rated increase of the third party limits will no longer be possible. I support this move. The pro-rated-limits provision that was brought in under the previous government was a very odd piece of public policy, and dropping it is definitely a good step, not just for third parties but obviously also for parties and candidates.

I'll now turn to the pre-writ spending limits for third parties.

Before commenting on the scope and level of these limits, I want to say a few words about the rationale for this move and the experience in some other jurisdictions.

On the rationale, the government has decided that spending limits for candidates and parties will be extended to the pre-writ period. I think it's fair to say that this is consistent with Canada's long experience with party and candidate spending limits, which date from 1974, and also with the broad public support for such limits. The new third party limits will apply as of June 30 in an election year, along with candidate and party limits, so they will cover a period of almost four months.

As members know, there's a fairly widely held view that to be effective, limits on party and candidate spending need to be paired with limits on third party spending. They're seen as complementary and, in a sense, mutually supportive. Indeed, the Supreme Court in the 2004 Harper decision stated that third party election spending limits are necessary to protect the integrity of the financing regime applicable to candidates and parties. If party and candidate limits are introduced for the pre-writ period, if that decision has been taken, it follows logically that third party spending or at least some aspects of that spending should also be subject to limits, otherwise that linkage, that complementarity, that exists during the election period will not apply.

Other jurisdictions have taken similar steps. In the U.K., there have been pre-writ spending limits for parties, candidates, and third parties since 2000. They're quite long. They apply for an entire year, give or take a few days depending on when the election is held. In Ontario, pre-writ limits for the three entities were introduced in 2016. They are applying in the election that's ending today, and the period there is six months. In your bill, it's somewhat shorter. It's close to four months. I find the duration in Bill C-76 to be reasonable.

As for the scope, the new limits will cover three areas: partisan activities, partisan advertising, and election surveys. This may appear analogous to the expanded scope of the election limits, but there's an important difference to be noted.

Unlike the definition of election advertising, partisan advertising does not include advertising messages that take a position on an issue with which a party or person is associated. You have, in the copy of my notes, the two definitions appended at the end. This means that if a third party sponsors advertising on an important public policy issue, but the messages do not promote or oppose a registered party or candidate, the cost of such advertising will not count against the pre-writ spending limit for the third party.

To illustrate this, here are a couple of examples of advertising that a third party might sponsor: Message A: Marijuana can harm your children's health, so don't vote Liberal. Message B: The Trudeau Liberal government legalized marijuana, which can harm your children's health.

Based on my reading of Bill C-76, third party spending on the first message would be subject to a limit, but spending on the second message—The Trudeau government legalized marijuana, which can harm your children's health—would not be because there's no promotion of voting for Liberals or against Liberals. This is often referred to as "issue advertising".

If that kind of a message were sponsored during the official election period, it would count against the third party limit. There's a policy difference between the pre-writ limits and the election limits for third parties.

I'll finish on the question of the level of permitted spending.

The pre-writ limits on third party spending are estimated at about $1 million nationally, and $10,000 in a single electoral district. Third parties' national pre-limit will thus be twice their election limit, and two-thirds of what registered parties will be allowed to spend in the pre-writ period. For the parties, it's estimated at $1.5 million.

Moreover, in light of the difference between the definitions of advertising expenses that I just explained, the pre-writ limits for third parties will cover a narrower range of activities than their election limits, so they have additional room. The spending on issue advertising is not subject to limit. In light of what I just said, I am not convinced it is necessary to set the pre-spending limits for third parties at such a high level.

● (1010)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Mr. Lavallée.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Nicolas Lavallée (Strategic Advisor, Citoyenneté jeunesse): Hello, Mr. Chair, members of parliament, dear members of the committee.

My name is Nicolas Lavallée. I am a Strategic Advisor with Citoyenneté jeunesse, formerly known as the Table de concertation des forums jeunesse régionaux du Québec. It was under that name that we appeared before this committee in the spring of 2014.

The core mandate of regional youth forums is to encourage the civic participation of youth and to serve as an advisor on youth matters. Various projects of these youth forums are funded by Quebec's youth secretariat and Quebec's ministry of immigration, diversity and inclusion. For provincial and municipal elections, we have also had various financial partners, including Élections Québec.

We also work with Élections Québec to conduct an election simulation exercise in Quebec called "Voters in training", which was developed by one of our members, the Forum jeunesse de l'île de Montréal. The youth forums conduct activities year round to increase young people's interest in politics and their sense of competency. For example, we offer activities and workshops on politics for young people. During an election period, we reach out to young voters on the ground to encourage them to exercise their right to vote and to tell them about the different voting procedures.

I will now tell you a bit about civic education and its impact on the youth vote.

In the last federal election, just 57.1% of young Canadians aged 18 to 24 voted, and just 57.4% of young Canadians aged 25 to 35 voted. That is about 10 percentage points below the overall voter turnout of 68.3% for that election. So it is essential for us to get young people out to vote since studies show that a young person who votes as soon as they are of age to do so is very likely to continue voting throughout their life. Getting young people to vote is ultimately a way of getting the whole population to vote.

Why do young people not vote? There are two types of factors at play. Essentially, there are motivational factors, such as interest in politics and knowledge, and voting access factors, such as registration on lists, lack of proper identification, and ignorance of voting procedures. The 2015 National Youth Survey, which measured the relative importance of all factors in the decision to vote, also identified both motivational and access factors.

We need to conduct civic education activities because they are effective. In the fall of 2016, Elections Canada also commissioned an independent evaluation of the Student Vote program. The study showed that the Student Vote program has a positive impact on the many factors involved in electoral participation. In particular, the program increases knowledge of and interest in politics, and also strengthens the view that voting is a civic duty.

If these campaigns are effective for grade school and high school students, they are of course also effective for young people who have just become eligible to vote. It is precisely that age group that needs more information and public education. So we are very excited to see that Bill C-76 would once again allow Elections Canada and the chief electoral officer to act independently to address factors relating to motivation to vote and access to voting. Campaigns for the general public also play an important role and help create healthy social pressure to vote.

Research has also shown that people are sensitive to those around them when it comes time to vote. Young people are especially influenced by their family, their peers, and society. Following the general elections in Quebec in 2014, Élections Québec had an evaluation done of its own voting promotion campaigns, which found that 75% of the population studied had seen the ads.

Finally, here are a few recommendations.

We think it is possible and desirable to once again address the motivational and voting access obstacles.

First, we recommend that the new wording of subclauses 18(1) and 18(2) of the bill be adopted. That would once again allow the chief electoral officer to conduct campaigns focused more on motivation or information, at his discretion, with full independence and, of course, without any restrictions.

Secondly, we support initiatives to increase voter participation, especially among young people. Citoyenneté jeunesse is very interested in measures such as creating a registry of future voters and extending the opening hours of advance polling stations.

Finally, we also ask that education remains at the core of Elections Canada's activities, whether through its own initiatives or by providing funding for other organizations, which are obviously non-partisan and whose mandate is civic education. Promoting the vote and democracy, whether through friends, family members, teachers, peers, and so on, is essential in order to prevent youth voter turnout from plummeting.

● (1015)

To turn the tide, society has to work as a whole and play a role, especially Elections Canada, which is responsible for conducting elections and has a great deal of expertise in this area.

I sincerely hope that this bill will be passed and that all the parties can agree to work together to strengthen the health of the country's democracy.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate this. We always want to have youth involvement, so that's great.

Now we have Michael Morden.

Mr. Michael Morden (Research Director, Samara Centre for Democracy): Chair, thank you very much for the opportunity to address this committee.

My name is Michael Morden and I'm the Research Director of the Samara Centre for Democracy. Samara is an independent, non-partisan charity that is dedicated to strengthening Canadian democracy through research and programming. Samara welcomes this effort to comprehensively refresh our elections law. This is a significant bill for Canada's democracy as it touches the democratic process itself. We think it deserves time and close scrutiny in Parliament, and a sincere effort to find cross-partisan consensus wherever possible.

Due to the length of the bill, I will also contain our analysis to the elements that touch most closely on Samara's past research, particularly related to voter participation and electoral accessibility, with a very brief note in closing on the parties.

First, on methods of voter identification, we suggest the following as a guiding principle: that the greatest priority be given to permitting as broad and flexible a range of methods for voters to identify themselves as possible, and where potential accuracy or administrative problems may exist, Elections Canada should exhaust other options first before addressing those problems before closing off possible, valid methods of identification. Therefore, we support restoring vouching and enabling the use of voter information cards as valid methods of establishing voter eligibility, in the latter instance with additional ID.

Second, we also support expanding the mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer to provide non-partisan public education on Canadian democracy, which addresses not just how to vote, but also why to vote, not just in classrooms, but beyond classrooms. Elections Canada is uniquely placed to fulfill this role as one of the few well-funded, non-partisan organizations focused on Canadian democracy. Following the example of most other electoral agencies in the country, Elections Canada should be empowered to advertise and educate both during and also between elections, making use of partnerships with community organizations, and contributing to building our capacity in the area of civic education, civic literacy.

Third, regarding young voters, a register of future voters could be very useful for preparing and engaging young people, but this is likely only the case if it's paired with enthusiastic programming. There is research evidence to suggest, looking at other jurisdictions, that where young voter preregistration has been introduced and promoted, it can result in an increase in voter turnout in the 18 to 24 age bracket. The research differs on the magnitude of that change, but they generally find a statistically significant improvement. However, when we're just dealing with the text of the legislation here, I think it should be noted in passing that it could have resourcing implications that can touch on the work of this committee. It's simply creating a system of pre-registry itself; it should not be expected to have significant effects. Pre-registry can be effective, but again experience from other jurisdictions suggests this is only true if it's paired with strong engagement efforts and energetic promotion.

We are happy to see that many of the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations are reflected in Bill C-76. I also want to briefly highlight an exception. This bill does not adopt a suggestion that the law be amended to permit holding election day on a weekend. I'm aware that this is something the committee has discussed as well. We think the idea may be worth again exploring. It's true that there's not systematic evidence to suggest that moving to weekend voting necessarily results in increased turnout. There are other immediate benefits as described by the Chief Electoral Officer, like making it easier to hire election workers, and having a wider selection of possible poll locations.

We also think it's possible that weekend voting could support higher turnout if it's one piece of a broader state and society partnership to change how we experience elections to make elections more social, more festive, and community-based.

One amendment this committee could consider would be to change the law to permit, but not require or prescribe, a weekend polling day. This could initially apply only to by-elections. In other words, the law could be amended to allow for experimentation such as holding a set of by-elections on a Saturday or Sunday. That experience could then help inform Parliament whether or not to move the polling day for general elections.

● (1020)

Finally, just briefly, on political parties, we believe it is important that the Chief Electoral Officer be given the power to compel receipts from parties. This is a power that provincial electoral agencies hold. It's a long-standing oversight. We support correcting this, and in fact, we think we should be asking for increasingly greater transparency in how parties spend the money that taxpayers reimburse.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Committee, the bells are ringing. There will be a vote at 11 o'clock, and we have another panel.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): It must be earlier than 11:00.

The Chair: It's at 10:50, but we'd be back here by 11:00.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): By 11:15.

The Chair: There are 27 minutes left. We have another full panel at 11:00, so what does the committee...?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Two minutes each?

The Chair: Two minutes for each question for each party?

Mr. Blake Richards: I don't know how much that accomplishes, but let's try.

The Chair: Okay, each party has two minutes.

Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): First of all, obviously, I'll be quick.

Mr. Seidle, thank you for coming in. You bring quite a bit of experience to this, even going back to the Lortie commission, which always interests me. You said limiting the writ period to 50 days was a positive measure for you. Some of the opposition we get from that in this bill is that it's a little bit too restrictive. Maybe it should be up to whatever it was. Last election, it was around two months. Prior to that, it was much shorter. Do you really feel that legislating—prescribing—the 50-day writ period is reasonable?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: One could debate about whether it should be 50 or 55 or 49. The principle that I disagree with was allowing the governing party to prolong the election campaign based on its own decision. The principle that we've held to since 1974 is that of a relatively level playing field. If you have the authority to extend the election campaign, and you happen to have a lot more money than your competitors do, you are, through that decision, potentially creating an advantage for yourself.

Money doesn't buy elections, and we saw in 2015 that the party with the most money was not re-elected, but it's not consistent with the principle of the level playing field to allow the government to simply extend. It was quite a bit longer than two months, as I recall. Somebody around the table should know how many days it was exactly.

Mr. Scott Simms: For me, it was two years.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Simms: I mean, that's beside the point.

In saying that, the pre-writ period also has some limitations put on it, and some people were opposed to that in that pre-writ period. I would assume, by extension, that you would feel there should be limitations over that as well, because of the wealth of some of the parties over the others.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: Well, yes. If you're going to limit the pre-writ spending, analogous with election spending, it needs to be during a defined period. The decision has been made that says "as of June 30 in the year of the election", so it will vary by a few days depending upon when the election actually falls. I find that to be more reasonable than in Ontario, which is six months, and certainly more reasonable than in the U.K. There's been an examination of the law in the U.K. by Lord Hodgson. He found in his research that many of the interest groups and others felt the regulatory burden was too heavy with a year limit. The government in the U.K. hasn't acted to shorten it yet, but it is part of the debate there.

● (1025)

Mr. Scott Simms: Could I make a brief comment?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Scott Simms: I'll be very brief. I apologize to the other gentlemen. I didn't get to you today due to time.

Mr. Morden from Samara, thank you for joining us today. You recently put out a survey to all members of Parliament. I'm bringing that up because I want all members of Parliament to please fill that out. It's very important. Thank you for providing that in your organization.

The Chair: The survey was created by the all-party caucus on democratic reform, so we put it forward. I have put mine in.

Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Mr. Seidle, I'll start with you. I'll ask you to give me, rather than a rationale, just a number. You mentioned pre-writ spending limits, and you thought they were too generous. What should that number be?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I don't have a figure to put in front of you today. I think it could be reduced by at least a third. I find there is a discrepancy between political parties and third parties; political parties have just 50% more room in the pre-writ period compared to third parties.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you, I appreciate the brevity as well.

In terms of the pre-writ spending limit period for the third parties, you have both made comments on that. Mr. Seidle, you made comments on that here. Samara, you've made comments on this as well in terms of third parties. I want to ask you both, and I guess I'll start with you, Mr. Morden. In Mr. Seidle's opening remarks, he mentioned that in the U.K., they have had pre-writ spending limits for about a year. In Ontario, they have pre-writ spending limits from about six months. Ours are essentially two months or less prior to the election.

Based on some of the comments that Samara has made in the past, there are certainly concerns about the money being spent pre-writ. You've even indicated that many third parties were actually spending a lot of money pre-writ, and then nothing, or essentially nothing, so they didn't have to register during the election. It shows they were just using the pre-writ period as a way around it. I wanted to get your thoughts on whether that "two months or less" period is enough, and if not, what time there should be for pre-writ spending limits.

Mr. Morden, and then Mr. Seidle.

Mr. Michael Morden: The short answer is that there's no period that wouldn't be a little bit arbitrary. I don't think it's entirely reasonable, but I would not be opposed to a compromise that extended the pre-writ period somewhat and found some middle ground between the way the law is drafted now and the Ontario provincial law, for example.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Mr. Seidle.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I indicated that I'm comfortable with the duration of the present limits. There's an issue that needs to be borne in mind, which is that, if you were to extend it further backwards, you risk running into a parliamentary session. That was an issue when British Columbia tried to bring in some limits about 10 years ago. They said that could create a chill while the legislature was in session. In other words, members would be making speeches, talking to the media, but third parties would be prevented from undertaking any direct advertising during that period. I think that the drafting of the bill must have taken that into account.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I have to, I guess.

You mention Ontario as one of your examples, when they have a six-month period. Do you see that as problematic, what they're doing in Ontario?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I'm not aware that it's created huge problems in Ontario. Some of that will come out during the election. I haven't been following the Ontario—

Mr. Blake Richards: Might it be good for us to hear from people who have been involved in the Ontario election and get their experiences from it before we make a final decision on what we do?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: Of course.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I apologize to the witnesses. This is not how we like to have conversations about such important bills as ones that affect our democracy.

Mr. Morden, you said this bill deserves time and close scrutiny. It's not the fault of anyone sitting around this table, but it's very unlikely this bill is going to get time and close scrutiny.

You support the bill broadly, but it's big. It's 350 pages. Do you think there's any notion of pushing forward some of the things that you support—say, the voter identification, the use of vouching—as a separate piece while these more complex things take longer—third party, misinformation, disinformation, social media, foreign influence, and some of the more complex things that have been introduced on top of the original bill that was introduced 18 months ago?

● (1030)

Mr. Michael Morden: I think it's a reasonable suggestion. I think ideally we would have taken on some of those elements and spent some time with.... In other words, each element, in part because they don't have a direct relationship to one another, has to be scrutinized in one shot. We had to limit our analysis precisely because we didn't have the capacity to go through the whole thing.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We're having a shared experience then.

Mr. Michael Morden: I think we are, so I'm sympathetic. I would imagine most agree that ideally there would be more time to permit that scrutiny while also meeting the other prerogative of being ready for GE 2019.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me pass that to you, Mr. Seidle. There are many elements of this bill. You focused on one, which raises some interesting questions about what would be caught and what wouldn't be caught in terms of—not a loophole—simply phrasing of a question between a third party. I don't have the answer to that question. I'm not sure the government does either. In terms of this legislation, we're a couple of weeks from the end of the spring sitting of Parliament. We're still not out of committee. What would your advice be to the committee members in terms of getting this right, something that's obviously so important?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I don't think the committee is being given sufficient time to study such an enormously complex bill. There are some areas in the bill that I haven't commented on, such as trying to prevent foreign funding of third parties and the whole area of trying to prevent hacking and interference in the actual vote. That's not an area of my expertise. This is a new public policy area. I've seen the list of witnesses for this week, and I don't see anybody I recognize as an expert on that area.

Yes, I think the amount of time you're being given isn't sufficient.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The consideration, then, is that we've known about some things in this bill—the vouching and such have been at least public knowledge for some time—but there's a whole section of the bill that is brand new to us as parliamentarians. The committee is going to have to deliberate as to how we handle this and not make mistakes with something so delicate.

Thank you, Chair. I know we have to get to votes.

The Chair: Thank you.

On the security part, we had CSE here this week.

There are 17 minutes left to vote, so we will come back as quickly as possible and we'll have a full committee at 11:00.

● ——————————— (Pause) ———————————

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● (1110)

The Chair: Good morning. Welcome back to the 113th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

For our second panel today, we are pleased to be joined by Elizabeth Dubois, Assistant Professor, Department of Communications, University of Ottawa; Cara Zwibel, Director, Fundamental Freedoms Program, Canadian Civil Liberties Association; and Chris Roberts, National Director, Social and Economic Policy Department, Canadian Labour Congress.

Thank you all for being available for us today. Maybe we will start with Professor Dubois with your opening statement and then we'll just go along the table.

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois (Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Perfect. Thank you for having me. I am happy to be here, speaking on Bill C-76 today. As mentioned, I am a professor at the University of Ottawa, in the communication department, and my research focuses on how people access and share political information and specifically, the role of digital media, social media platforms, and search engines, for example, in that process. An example here is a report that Dr. Fenwick McKelvey, who is at Concordia University, and I wrote, which is the first, and I believe only, report on the state of political bots in Canada, which was part of the University of Oxford's computational propaganda project.

Today, I want to draw your attention to three key aspects of Bill C-76 in my opening remarks. They are computational approaches to voter suppression, technology and platform companies, and political party privacy policies.

First up, based on evidence from recent elections and referenda internationally, we know that individuals and groups are experimenting with computationally supported tactics for political communication with the electorate. This could lead to voter suppression.

These techniques might include creating automated social media accounts, which we call bots. They are non-human. They could include creating fake accounts or troll accounts, which are run by humans, but aren't necessarily representative of actual voters. They could be targeted advertisement strategies which involve quickly removing ads, so they are very hard to track.

By using computational approaches and automation, it is possible to amplify and spread information very quickly. It is also possible to dampen messages and suppress ideas. This can be used for obvious and explicit forms of voter suppression, such as telling people to go to the wrong polling place. One could imagine a bot-driven version of the robocall scandal. It could also be used for more covert forms of suppression, such as creating an environment of distrust in the electoral system or encouraging political apathy. This could be done via a chatbot, for example. Emerging forms of artificial intelligence become pretty important when we're thinking about securing the integrity of our elections.

Notably, most research currently considers the role of political bots on social media alone, but increasingly, tools such as WhatsApp and other instant messaging applications are being employed. Voter suppression in these contexts is even harder to track, trace, and then enforce our existing laws.

This is clearly against the spirit of the law, but not explicitly addressed. Nor are there adequate mechanisms in place to prevent or identify these practices. A requirement to register use of automated techniques, which would also include emerging artificial intelligence approaches for communicating with the electorate, would be a very valuable addition to this legislation.

I would like to note that I say register and not ban. I believe there are valuable and legitimate uses of automated techniques for communicating with the electorate that should not necessarily be discouraged.

Second, considering the role of platforms, such as major social media companies and search engines, I think there could be better direction within Bill C-76. The bill requires organizations to not knowingly sell election advertisements to foreign entities, which of course will affect platform companies. However, beyond that, the bill ignores the substantial role platforms play when it comes to enforcing many aspects of Canadian election laws.

For example, the low cost of online advertisement and the ability to micro-target means that hundreds of versions of advertisements can be delivered throughout various Internet platforms. They are hard to track and therefore, it can be difficult to establish if and when illegal activities are happening, such as voter suppression or advertisement spend which exceeds spending limits, is purchased by foreign entities or is purchased by unregistered third parties.

Having been confronted with this problem elsewhere, for example, in the U.S., platform companies are starting to create advertisement transparency tools which are useful, but this is voluntary and could be changed at any moment, if it's not required legally.

This poses significant risk to Canadian elections because platforms make decisions in an international and commercial context, which does not necessarily align with the needs of Canada's democracy.

Finally, Bill C-76 requires political parties to make a privacy statement about protecting information of individuals. This proposed legislation does not include any form of audit or verification that the policy is adequate, ethical, or being followed. There are no penalties for non-compliance. There are no provisions that permit Canadians to request their data be corrected or deleted, which is the case in many other jurisdictions.

● (1115)

It is certainly fair to say that this issue is much broader than elections. The fact that political parties are not covered by PIPEDA or other privacy constraints, and the fact that elections are fundamental to the functioning of our democracy mean it's an issue that I don't think we can ignore. It needs to be discussed further, in the context of this bill.

Ultimately, I think there are useful aspects in this bill, but there are also substantial concerns regarding such things as computational approaches to voter suppression, the role of technology companies and platforms, and privacy, which I hope will be considered in more detail.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to questions.

The Chair: Thank you. That was very helpful and interesting information.

Now we'll go to Ms. Zwibel from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

Ms. Cara Zwibel (Director, Fundamental Freedoms Program, Canadian Civil Liberties Association): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning on behalf of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, or CCLA.

I know my time this morning is short so I want to highlight CCLA's two primary concerns with respect to Bill C-76. The first relates to political advertising, particularly the restrictions on third party advertising. The second concerns political parties' treatment of personal information.

With respect to political advertising, we wish to highlight that what the legislation currently does, and what the bill would continue to do, is place significant restrictions on political speech, speech that is considered to lie at the very core of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms' protection of freedom of expression. We appreciate and take seriously the concern that wealth should not be translated into the ability to dominate political discourse. However, we have not seen any evidence that justifies or even purports to justify the restrictions that are placed on third party advertising, or that would justify the distinctions that this bill makes between different types of political expression and different political actors.

We are aware that the act's third party spending limits were upheld by a majority of the Supreme Court of Canada in the Harper case. In our view, however, the majority of the court was wrong in that case. The evidence before the court could not justify the significant restrictions placed on third party advertising. As the dissenting judges in that case noted:

> The law at issue sets advertising spending limits for citizens—called third parties—at such low levels that they cannot effectively communicate with their fellow citizens on election issues during an election campaign. The practical effect is that effective communication during the writ period is confined to registered political parties and their candidates.

The dissenters pointed out that the spending limit was less than what it would cost to run a full page ad for a single day in national newspapers. Even with the increase in spending limits brought in by this bill, it's not clear if third party actors would have an effective voice in an election campaign. In our view, this is a serious infringement of charter rights that can only be justified with clear and compelling evidence. To date, we have yet to see or hear any of that evidence.

The bill also restricts political parties in the pre-writ period, only in terms of their partisan advertising, while the restrictions on third parties are much broader. Again, it's not clear on what basis this distinction has been drawn or how it can be justified.

At a more general level, CCLA has concerns about the value and practicality of differentiating between partisan and election advertising, or more generally, attempting to limit issue-based advocacy when an issue is one with which a "registered party or candidate is associated".

The U.S. Supreme Court has noted that what separates issue advocacy and political advocacy is a line in the sand drawn on a windy day. By continuing to restrict issue-based advocacy, the limits on third party advertising may simply serve to unduly narrow the parameters of public debate around government policy or proposed policy options, rather than limit the kind of expression that we're trying to limit here, that which influences or aims to improperly influence elections.

We also question why spending limits are set out in legislation set by the individuals and parties who stand to benefit from restricting voices that may be critical of them. We urge the committee to consider, either in the context of this bill or in a future study, whether an independent body should be established to address the question of spending limits for third parties and political parties and candidates.

The second issue I'd like to address is Bill C-76's provisions aimed at empowering parties to better protect the privacy of Canadians.

Put simply, this scheme proposed by the bill is inadequate. It contains no meaningful privacy protections and no independent oversight of how the parties protect personal information or consequences for failing to do so. In light of what we are beginning to understand about the information that can be harnessed from social media and other tools and used by political parties to engage in micro-targeting of voters, the failure to truly address the privacy issue in this bill is disappointing, to say the least.

I'm aware that the committee has heard about this issue from a number of witnesses in the last few days, so I won't belabour the point. I'll simply state that the CCLA is in general agreement with the amendments proposed by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada.

Finally, CCLA wishes to note its support for portions of the bill that reverse some of the negative changes that were made when Parliament passed the so-called Fair Elections Act. We welcome the provisions that allow for the use of voter information cards, the return of vouching, as well as the loosening of restrictions on the educational activities of the Chief Electoral Officer. We also welcome the reform that will allow Canadian citizens who reside abroad to participate in federal elections.

I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you for having me this morning.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Chris Roberts from the Canadian Labour Congress.

Mr. Chris Roberts (National Director, Social and Economic Policy Department, Canadian Labour Congress): Mr. Chair and committee members, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am here on behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress, Canada's largest labour central. The CLC is the voice on national and international issues for three million working people in Canada. It brings together 55 national and international unions, 12 provincial and territorial federations of labour, and over 100 local labour councils.

The Canadian Labour Congress broadly supports Bill C-76. In particular, the CLC is supportive of the measures in the bill to ensure a fair, accessible, and inclusive voting process. We strongly support the bill's measures to improve access for voters with physical disabilities and to include child care and expenses related to a disability in a candidate's expenses.

Bill C-76 restores the ability of the Chief Electoral Officer to authorize the notice of confirmation of registration, the voter information card, as identification. This is a welcome step in our view. We also support the restoration of the ability of the Chief Electoral Officer to undertake public education and information programs to promote awareness of the electoral process among the voting public, especially groups facing barriers to access.

Bill C-76 reintroduces the option of vouching for the identity and residence of an elector, a step that we support. We agree, however, with Monsieur Mayrand that the option of vouching should be extended to staff in long-term care facilities and nursing homes, even when the staff person is not an elector in the same polling division.

I want to turn now to the bill's ramifications for third parties, such as unions and labour organizations.

Bill C-76 introduces significant additional requirements for third parties participating in elections. Under the bill, reporting requirements on third parties will become more extensive than for other participants in the electoral process.

During and between elections, unions and labour centrals engage with their members and with Canadians about issues that are important to working people. This education and engagement is vital to the informed and effective participation of working people in civic life and democratic debate.

We appreciate the fact that subclause 222(3) of Bill C-76 excludes from the definition of "partisan activity" the act of taking a position on issues that parties and candidates may be associated with. This is in the pre-writ period. Nevertheless, we urge the committee to carefully evaluate the additional restrictions and reporting requirements in Bill C-76 to ensure that the ability of labour organizations to engage with members and the public on workers' issues is not impeded.

A leading concern of the CLC is that if and when Bill C-76 is enacted, Elections Canada will issue an updated handbook for third parties that establishes the identical interpretative guidance for pre-writ partisan activity and partisan advertising over the Internet, as Elections Canada established for Internet election advertising during the writ period.

This established that Internet-based messaging during the writ period is only election advertising if there is a placement cost, that is, the cost of purchasing the advertising space. If there is no placement cost, then social media, email, and own-website messaging do not fall within the definition of election advertising. We hope and expect that Elections Canada will apply the same definition to pre-writ messaging. This is especially important now that, effectively, the period between elections—from polling day of the previous general election all the way up to the current pre-writ period—will be subject to regulation and reporting requirements.

With that, honourable members, I'll conclude my remarks.

Thank you very much for your attention.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you all very much.

Now we'll do some rounds of questioning, starting with Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first set of questions goes to Professor Dubois.

I'm fascinated by your presentation. I think it's something we're all thinking a lot about, with the recent elections that have occurred around the world.

I'm interested in the computational approaches that you talked about. How much do you think those approaches are currently being used in provincial elections or federal elections that we've had in North America?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: When we're talking about computational approaches, I'm going to be specific and talk about political bots for the moment. Political bots are automated social media accounts. They're also automated accounts that could exist on instant messaging apps or through other communication technologies.

Right now we know there was substantial use of those bots in the U.S. election. A report written by Sam Woolley, who is based at the University of Oxford, showed some concrete evidence. In the report that Fenwick McKelvey and I wrote about the state of bots in Canada, we also saw examples of political bots during the 2015 federal election. We've started doing some initial work during the election that's happening in Ontario today. Those results are not confirmed yet, and we still have some more analysis to do, but there definitely are examples of automation being used. Not all of that automation is necessarily for voter suppression tactics or for things that we necessarily would be uncomfortable with in the election.

An example is most media companies use automated approaches to send out tweets and Instagram posts and Facebook messages all at the same time rather than one individual typing on each of these different platforms. That's the form of computational political messaging that we're pretty okay with. It is very difficult to say exactly how much to measure in a quantitative way. Voter suppression exists because it is very hidden and hard to trace so I can't give you specific numbers.

● (1130)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Targeted messaging, for instance, stuff we're more familiar with at least at the political level as representatives, when you're putting out posts and messaging you can target it to certain populations, but you can also prohibit certain populations, demographics, from seeing it. What are your thoughts on that? Is that a form of voter suppression?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: This depends on our understanding of voter suppression. I'm not a lawyer so I can't talk specifically to what should or shouldn't count in one jurisdiction or another. What constitutes voter suppression in different countries or even provinces can vary. Certainly in the U.S. there have been examples of choosing not to show housing advertisements to specific cultural populations, which was deemed to be illegal in the U.S. housing context, because it was thought of as racially discriminatory. We see examples where that targeting and choice not to target specific individuals is legally not permissible. Then I think more broadly about the kind of voter engagement we want to have and the idea of citizens being equally able to participate in their electoral system if certain groups of people are systematically not being invited into the communication, not being given information by the candidates who are running in their area. That is potentially very problematic.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: This legislation does prohibit foreign spending in our elections and also any collusion between third parties here and foreign actors. Do you think that is a good step?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: I think it's a good step, but it's also important to recognize that it's very hard to trace, and without support and collaboration with the platform companies that are often used as the distribution mechanism here it's very difficult to ensure that those steps are going to be sufficient.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: We have some of those platforms coming before us later on this evening. What kinds of supports and co-operation would you like to see with those companies going forward?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Some things are already under way with those companies, for example, creating new advertising transparency tools, which is really wonderful. These companies often make themselves available to Elections Canada, to candidates if they encounter some sort of problem during an election campaign. The problem is these are voluntary at the moment, and without a requirement that they continue to do things that serve the Canadian public and Canadian democracy, they could change their mind, and we would be stuck with whatever changes make sense for their international business needs.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: How do you think we can better prohibit the distribution of fake news? This legislation does take a look at that a little bit, and it also makes sure that people are not misleading the public through any type of a source. Do you think that's a good step forward?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: The idea of dealing with disinformation—I'm going to use that word because I think the term "fake news" has become politicized in a way that is no longer useful in terms of the evidence that I can actually speak to from an academic perspective—is, I think, a lot broader than the election context specifically, which is largely why I've just spoken specifically about voter suppression tactics and the role that disinformation can play there.

The ideas put forward in the bill about not being able to mislead seem, from my understanding, to be specifically about your not being able to pretend to be a candidate. You can't act as though you are speaking for a party when you're not. That's not the same as the larger voter suppression issue.

● (1135)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate you all being here.

I'll start with you, Mr. Roberts. You're here on behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress. It seems as though your group has been pretty involved in elections and in the lead-up to elections, in the last election in particular, I think. How much did your organization spend on election-related advertising in the lead-up to the 2015 election, in the pre-writ period?

Mr. Chris Roberts: In the pre-writ period, which didn't exist in 20...?

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, there was no legislative pre-writ period, but, of course, prior to that, we all referred to the period before the election as the pre-writ period, so, let's say, in the last six months before the election.

Mr. Chris Roberts: As I tried to convey, the CLC drastically underspends legislated limits for the election period typically. We're engaged in issue-based discussion and conversation with members and with Canadians. I will just tell you that we didn't come close to the number.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure, but can you give us a ballpark figure of how much you would have spent on advertising in the pre-writ period?

Mr. Chris Roberts: I can't, but I can provide it to the committee.

Mr. Blake Richards: Can you provide that, yes?

Mr. Chris Roberts: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: I know you have a number of affiliate organizations. I would assume that there are some—well, I wouldn't even assume. Certainly some of your affiliate organizations have said outright that there was some coordination of messaging and working together on certain campaigns around the election advertising. So if you take into account the spending of some of your affiliate organizations, is that something you could make available to us as well, how much organizations like the Ontario Federation of Labour and others spent?

Mr. Chris Roberts: Certainly the provincial and territorial federations of labour, which are part of the CLC, would fall under the single umbrella of the CLC, so that would be included in any umbrella number.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, so you would have that.

Mr. Chris Roberts: As far as affiliate unions, unions affiliated with the CLC, go, you'd want to ask them—

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, we can do that. Hopefully we'll have the time to do that, if the government allows it.

You spent $300,000 on advertising during the 2015 election. Can you give us some sense as to what type of advertising was done, what kinds of campaigns were conducted with those dollars?

Mr. Chris Roberts: The CLC typically runs a campaign called "Better Choices" in which we focus on specific issues. In 2015, the issues were retirement security, child care, and things like that, issues fundamental to our members and, we believe, to working people. We try to generate a conversation on the issues and not on which party to support. The CLC doesn't tell members, doesn't purport to tell members which party to vote for.

Mr. Blake Richards: The advertising that you do wouldn't include anything that would promote or oppose any political party or candidate?

Mr. Chris Roberts: Under Bill C-23, the Fair Elections Act, advertising with respect to issues that are associated with a party is regulated under those provisions. So, yes, in law, they do fall under that definition, but we certainly don't aim at them in partisan terms. We discuss the substantive issues.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, but you said that the Ontario Federation of Labour and others like them are part of your advertising and whatnot during the federal elections. On September 1, 2015, they indicated that, and I will quote from the press release they put out, "The Ontario Federation of Labour is working with the Canadian Labour Congress"—and it mentions other people they are working with—"to defeat the Harper Conservatives and elect an NDP Government during the October 19, 2015 federal election."

To me, it sounds as though they are certainly indicating that there was some effort being made to promote a certain political party and oppose another one. Is that inaccurate?

● (1140)

Mr. Chris Roberts: I work for the Canadian Labour Congress, not for the Ontario Federation of Labour.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure. They are saying they worked with the Canadian Labour Congress.

Mr. Chris Roberts: All I can tell you is that the CLC has an approach to general elections where we focus on the issues. That's what we want to talk about. Absolutely, we leave it for members to decide which party of the day best represents their interests on those issues.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure, but they did indicate they were working with the Canadian Labour Congress to do just that, to say they were opposing one political party and supporting another. You may want to have a discussion with them about that, if that's not your policy and intention to do that.

Your funding, in terms of the funding that you utilize, that $300,000 and other election-related activities and pre-writ activities related to elections, where does that come from? Is that strictly from the dues of members, or are there other sources of funding that you receive?

Mr. Chris Roberts: The only funding to support the work of the Canadian Labour Congress comes from affiliated unions, which in turn derive from members' dues, absolutely. I would just remind you that's protected by the Supreme Court decision in Lavigne and in law in Canada, which understands the advocacy and issue campaigns of the labour movement as being part of its associational role as collective bargaining agents for—

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, but it's your understanding, though, that the money that's coming in from your affiliated organizations is strictly and 100% derived from membership dues, or to your knowledge, would there be any other sources of funding?

Mr. Chris Roberts: I don't know the answer to that. I just know that the CLC derives its funding base from a per capita amount charged on the basis of membership to affiliated unions.

Mr. Blake Richards: Would you know if those affiliated organizations ever received any foreign funding? Would you know the answer to that?

Mr. Chris Roberts: As most people who know about the labour movement in Canada already realize, there are international unions that are present in Canada and that played a role, historically, in the formation of unions in Canada. Many Canadian affiliate unions of the Canadian Labour Congress are headquartered in the United States. I am not sure if that's what you're referring to.

Mr. Blake Richards: Would those members get a say in how their dues are spent on election advertising?

Mr. Chris Roberts: Absolutely. The Canadian Labour Congress is arguably the largest democratically member owned and operated organization in Canada.

Mr. Blake Richards: If members didn't want their dues to go towards this campaign to defeat a certain government and promote another one, they would have a right to have that money spent in other ways?

Mr. Chris Roberts: Absolutely. They have multiple opportunities, all through the year in the election cycle, to participate along with their co-workers in the organizational life of their unions to shape the policy direction and the issues and the parties they support.

We definitely support that kind of democratic engagement.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's good to know.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That's quite enlightened. We don't do that here in Parliament, where voters might not want to buy a bunch of fighter jets, but they're buying them anyway.

This is a really interesting panel. I'm not going to have enough time, so I'll try to keep things short.

I'll start with you, Professor Dubois. If you had Facebook and Twitter in front of you, what would be your first point of contention with how they're operating right now, in terms of their vigilance as the platform for sometimes nefarious activities?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: There is discussion from these companies, often, that it's very difficult to identify voter suppression or other disinformation tactics. Frankly, we dealt with spam, and we can deal with other forms of content that we don't want to have on the platform.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: This may be hard to be empirical about, but in terms of influencing a Canadian voter's mind today, between the so-called traditional media—print, radio, television, and social media—certainly social media has grown. Are they now equivalent? Would you suggest that they've perhaps become even more significant in terms of how Canadians consume their news and hear about different stories, say in the Ontario election or the upcoming federal one? In that ratio between listening to the evening news, driving and hearing it on the radio, and what they're getting on their phones and computers, do we have any evidence as to how influential those platforms have become, in the minds of voters?

● (1145)

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: One of the problems is that we don't have strong, consistent data in Canada about Canadian Internet use because the StatsCan survey was cut. From other countries that are similar, we know that—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Is it still cut? Is it still not being done?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: There's going to be a new round of it, I believe, next year. I'm not sure. You'll have to check with StatsCan. It's unclear how much detail—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We're safe to say they're significant. I'm just thinking that if you put an ad in *The Globe and Mail*, under Elections Canada laws, you have to say who funded it, and you have to keep a registry of that ad.

If you post one of these flash ads on Facebook or Twitter, which are driven by an algorithm, to certain micro-targeted voters, there's no reporting at all. We don't know where the money came from for the ad. We don't have any record of the ad unless you grab a screen capture of it. Should it be the equivalent?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Whether or not they're equivalent in terms of their influence on people—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Reporting.

I'm sorry. A better question is, "Should they have the same rules applied to them?"

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Right. In terms of advertising online, they should. It should be made technically possible through the platform's interface to say when an advertisement has been bought by a campaign, and to make it clear why you're being sent that message and who has decided to target it at you. Does that...?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I think so. Facebook has been in a lot of trouble with bots and Cambridge Analytica. Have they fully cleaned up their act now? Is it a secure platform? Could there be another version of Cambridge Analytica out there plotting to figure out another loophole in their system?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: The idea of absolute security with any technology is not one that we are ever going to reach but getting closer is the best we can do. I think that because of the public pressure Facebook has been facing, they are taking steps, but not because of Canadian laws. At the end of the day, that means if pressure is put on them by other jurisdictions or by commercial interests, they won't necessarily continue that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Bill C-76 is an opportunity to put that pressure on.

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Are we taking that opportunity right now under the bill?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: No.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

Ms. Zwibel, I want to put something to you as a suggestion. You want third parties to have the capacity to have more speech and more ability to be engaged on issue campaigns or involved in the election. If they have that influence, should they also be given a responsibility to report that is similar to how political parties have to report in terms of financing, spending limits, and all of the things that we have to do as political actors?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: I haven't said that I think third parties necessarily need higher limits. What I said was that I don't see the evidence for the existing limits.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Oh.

Ms. Cara Zwibel: I don't understand where these numbers come from, and I don't understand where some of the distinction—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It is the same as where the last numbers came from.

Ms. Cara Zwibel: Again, I'm not exactly sure where those come from, but given that we have at least some members of the Supreme Court of Canada saying that those numbers are so low that they effectively amount to a monopoly by political parties and candidates, I think that's something that needs to be addressed.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me step back for a moment, Professor Dubois, in terms of privacy. Ms. Zwibel, you may comment as well if we can get a moment.

There is no audit, no verification, and non-effective controls of privacy on political parties. Why do you think that is? What's so special about us?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Political parties have a responsibility to connect with the electorate, and because they are not necessarily driven by commercial interests, the argument has been that privacy laws should be considered differently given those different contexts.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right, yet we have those restrictions on political parties in B.C., the province I live in. Things seem to be working out.

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: In the EU, with GDPR, there is evidence to suggest that the idea of data protection should be extended across the different contexts in which your data could be collected, tracked, and used.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The consequences are real: on our democracy, on decisions, on Brexit, on the last U.S. election. Do people care?

People are exposing all sorts of private personal information on Facebook all the time. So what if political parties collect a lot of data and know a lot about the voter? Maybe it makes political parties smarter.

● (1150)

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: People care, but they're constantly having to trade their own data for the things that they need. In terms of political parties being able to make valuable use of this data, I think that's true. I think there's a lot of value to political parties being able to understand the electorate through the kinds of interactions they have on the Internet. However, citizens also deserve the ability to understand how that's working and what data is being collected about them, and, importantly, to have a door open so that they can correct that information when it's wrong. It can unfairly harm certain groups of people in ways that I don't think should be built in to our electoral system.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Suppression.

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: It can be suppression, or intentionally excluding certain voters who are maybe less likely to vote for you, so not worth your time.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Understood.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will go to Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, chair.

I have some quick questions for the three of you based on what I've heard thus far. I'll go to Mr. Roberts first.

You have been talking about the paradigm you're in, prior to C-76 and prior to C-23, and I've seen a lot of the issue campaigning you have done from the CLC. I have been involved in it, as a matter of fact, not just because I'm left of centre, but because I've liked quite a bit of it.

If you notice now, we're shifting things here towards election activity, election advertising, and election surveys. The middle one, election advertising, I get. It's the other two, the activity and the surveying information you get from the activities you do. What do you do in your organization that would be captured under those two headlines?

Mr. Chris Roberts: As I understand it, the definition of partisan activity is now regulated, insofar as it promotes or opposes the candidacy or election of a particular party or candidate, but not insofar as it's speaking to an issue with which that party or candidate is associated. There is some attempt to carve out the issue-focused political work that might be considered political activity but not partisan activity, if you follow me.

With respect to survey undertakings, as I understand it, the focus is on election surveys that are used to inform decisions that are partisan in nature, subsequently.

Our primary concern is to preserve the space to engage on the issues, while understanding and appreciating the need to regulate political partisan spending. I want to quickly flag here what I think is, ironically, the largest concern that we should all have with respect to the undue influence and unbalanced influence in political life and discourse. That is the increasing inequality of income and wealth that leads to a concentration of economic and political power amongst groups that can then sway voters on democratic debate and elections. One only need look at the United States.

Mr. Scott Simms: Are you talking about general organizations or are you talking about political parties?

Mr. Chris Roberts: I'm talking mainly about third parties in political life.

Mr. Scott Simms: Your concern is that the richer ones cannot be captured by what we're trying to do here, when it comes to third party spending?

Mr. Chris Roberts: All of what I just said was to underscore our position that we understand and appreciate the need to regulate third party political engagement.

Mr. Scott Simms: As long as we don't get into the issue-based activities that you do.

● (1155)

Mr. Chris Roberts: That there is as much space preserved as possible for that kind of political engagement....

Mr. Scott Simms: Are you getting the space here? Just between you and me, of course.

Mr. Chris Roberts: From the CLC's perspective, there are things to appreciate in the bill. I do think the committee does need to look at and very carefully reflect on the amount of space provided.

In terms of the spending limits, the CLC doesn't typically come close to the spending restrictions, but there are a lot of reporting requirements which really are far more extensive than other participants in the process.

Mr. Scott Simms: I'm glad you ended with spending limits, because that leads me to my question for Ms. Zwibel about the spending limits.

I'm sorry if I'm paraphrasing this wrong, but you talked about the arbitrary nature by which these limits are imposed. We have heard a lot of evidence that Mr. Roberts just gave, which is that we don't get close to those limits. What's your reaction to that?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: It's true that some groups don't get close to those limits.

Mr. Scott Simms: For us, so far, it is most groups. Go ahead.

Ms. Cara Zwibel: We've been living with these limits for over a decade now, so it's hard to know what would happen if there was more space. Look at the Harper case and some of the facts that the dissent put forward. I mentioned one, that you couldn't run a single-day ad in national newspapers. With the constituency limit, you couldn't actually send out a bulk mailing to everyone in certain constituencies. Those are the kinds of metrics I think we need to be looking at when we're trying to set some of these limits.

I appreciate that there are concerns about groups that may coordinate, or that there's the potential for third parties to overtake the space that political parties operate, but I think right now the balance is too much in the other direction. Political parties and candidates are able to dominate the discussion, and there isn't that effective space for third parties. The definition that incorporates this issue-based advocacy is problematic, and I think it's problematic not just for those who need to be governed by it but also for those who need to enforce it. To expect the Chief Electoral Officer to understand what issues are on the table for every candidate and party—that's a pretty significant undertaking.

Mr. Scott Simms: I think I see what you're getting at. I wanted to ask a follow-up, but I can't right now. I don't have a lot of time left.

Professor Dubois.... Is it Dr. Dubois?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: Yes.

Mr. Scott Simms: It's Dr. Dubois. Okay.

Mr. Cullen stole my question. I shouldn't say he stole it, because he was thinking as I was thinking that if Facebook and Twitter were in front of you, what would you ask them? I remember from years ago, whether it was back in the 1990s or the early 2000s, this term called "truthiness". It's a fact but it's only half the story, which later becomes the full story to some people. How do you police that?

For me, that was the biggest problem I had to deal with as a politician. When people come to me now with Facebook and say, "How dare you think this", I'm like, "Well, no, I don't." Then I'm asked, "But is this true", and I have to say, "Yes, that's true, but...", and it goes from there. The manipulation of the story scares me, and the proliferation of this.

As a general question, what do we say to a social media platform that to me seems to be shrugging their shoulders as if it's just a buyer beware kind of thing?

Dr. Elizabeth Dubois: I think it's important to recognize that there are things that are kind of on the periphery. Is this appropriate or not? Is this legal or not? Then there are things that are very clearly not appropriate and not legal.

I think the question of what is socially acceptable or morally acceptable is an existential one that probably goes beyond the discussion of this bill. Questions of things like voter suppression and telling people things that are blatantly untrue are very clearly not in line with what should happen in an election process. These companies need to recognize that even if the solving-all-the-problems idea is not a switch they can flip right now, they can build in, reasonably quickly, approaches to dealing with the things that are obviously and blatantly against the law.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our last intervenor is Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Is it a five-minute intervention at this point?

● (1200)

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'll start by taking a tiny bit of issue with my colleague Scott. I think this will actually be useful.

I interpret the term "truthiness" as meaning not part of the truth that leads in the wrong direction, but rather the presentation of something that is, while not factually true, morally true; that is, it ought to be true. If you disagree with that ought statement, then you are reduced in your moral stature.

It's a way of shifting a debate from the left hemisphere of the brain to the right hemisphere of the brain as a way of mixing up your audience.

Mr. Scott Simms: Right. It's like negative billing.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid: That's not a bad example. Yes, that's right: military intelligence, and so on.

Anyway, I throw that out there because I actually think there is a problem with that.

Ms. Zwibel, the minority opinion reference you referred to is Harper v. AG Canada. Is that right?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: How many justices were there? Do you remember?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: There were three.

Mr. Scott Reid: Three, so it was almost a majority.

Ms. Cara Zwibel: It was a six-to-three decision.

Mr. Scott Reid: It was not a panel of the whole court. Okay.

Did they use the term "monopoly of parties"? You made reference to the term "monopoly".

Ms. Cara Zwibel: Yes, I'm not sure. I don't have the decision with me, unfortunately, but I think they do use that term in reference to the ability of parties and candidates to monopolize the discourse during an election because of the way the spending limits are set.

Mr. Scott Reid: It raises a perspective that we haven't taken on this committee, which is the notion...we assume you're trying to create a level playing field from the prospective parties, which is why we spend so much time discussing the relative merits of setting up a debates commission that might exclude the Green Party or the Bloc. We heard yesterday that one of Canada's numerous communist parties was complaining about the fact that they would be excluded.

The other perspective the minority was presenting was that strictly speaking, elections don't belong to the parties even though they're the ones contesting them; rather, they belong to the public. I guess third parties are, in essence, groups of public-spirited citizens regardless of how they're financed, and all those other questions, who are trying to tell us to do this, do that, and they have as much of a legitimate space in there as political parties do.

Does that animate what they're saying?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: Yes, that's the idea, that third parties are just citizens who are trying to get out there and tell their fellow citizens what they think about during the election, and while recognizing that there may well be a need to make sure we don't...I don't think anyone wants to turn us into what we see south of the border, where money very clearly leads the way. We need to be careful about how we impose those restrictions, and base them on some evidence.

Mr. Scott Reid: This gets to the fundamental problem. I can see where the court is going, and as a civil libertarian myself, I have a lot of sympathy for that idea.

The trouble is I don't know how we avoid getting to where we are south of the border, once we say we're removing restrictions on third parties spending as much as they want, and I also don't see how we avoid certain things. I'm not sure we'd want to avoid this; I merely throw this out as things it would be hard to avoid, things like money being used for demotivation of certain groups of voters or demonization of candidates. I'm not talking about making things up, saying that so-and-so is an axe murderer or a pedophile. I'm talking about discouraging people by saying that Doug Ford is the scariest human being they've ever seen; my goodness, they can't let him be Premier of Ontario or take his name out and drop in Andrea Horwath's and say the same thing. I don't see how you avoid that.

Is there a way out of that conundrum, or in the end are we forced to choose between Scylla on the one side and Charybdis on the other? I throw that back to you for comment.

Ms. Cara Zwibel: I don't want to suggest that it's an easy thing to solve. Our concern is that we've tipped the balance in the wrong direction and that's not to say that we should open the doors and say there are no limits, but we have to look carefully at what those limits are and what they mean. I point to the dissent because to me it's compelling when you look at a limit for a riding or a constituency and say you couldn't send mail to everyone in this constituency with this number.

To me that means the number is probably too low, which we were discussing recently in our office. The spending limits are set out in the legislation and then they're indexed to inflation. You've just been discussing having an independent commission on debates. You may not want to do this, but it may be that just like electoral boundaries, setting these spending limits shouldn't be done by sitting members of Parliament, but by those outside the system who can take a look at the media landscape, what it costs, what the trends are, and see where those limits should be set.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Are you aware of any example of a place that has this kind of limit set independently?

Ms. Cara Zwibel: I don't have an example. We discussed this yesterday in the office. It struck me that it's comparable in some ways to the fact that we do this with electoral boundaries because there's a vested interest, obviously.

Mr. Scott Reid: I know all about that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you all for coming. It's been very helpful for our study.

We'll quickly go to our next panel.

● ——————————— (Pause) ———————————

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The Chair: Welcome back to the 113th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

For our final panel we are joined by Paul G. Thomas, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies at the University of Manitoba, who is appearing by video conference from Winnipeg; Glenn Cheriton, President of Commoners' Publishing; and from the Green Party of Canada, Jean-Luc Cooke, Member of Council, National Office.

Thank you all for being here. Now I'll turn the floor over to Professor Thomas for his opening statement.

Dr. Paul Thomas (Professor Emeritus, Political Studies, University of Manitoba, As an Individual): Thank you very much. I have submitted a brief to the committee, and it has been translated and circulated. I will try to stay strictly within the five-minute limit and make five brief points in five minutes so the chair doesn't have to bring down the guillotine on me.

The first point, and an integrating theme of my brief to the committee, is that Bill C-76 is an excellent illustration of how technical and complicated election law has become in response to changing social, technological, and political activities within Canada and elsewhere. Under those conditions, Elections Canada needs a very diverse and flexible set of policy tools in order to plan for and execute elections. In other words, unlike the traditional Canada Elections Act, which is very detailed and prescriptive, we need a future act that grants broader authority to the professionals within Elections Canada. Bill C-76 goes some way in this direction. It grants the CEO of Elections Canada more authority to conduct the operations of the election, it grants the commissioner administrative monetary penalties, and it makes use of written interpretations and opinions, and so on.

Second, overall, this bill is worthwhile. I endorse it in general terms. I endorse the features that are brought forward from Bill C-33 that made changes to the more problematic features of the so-called Fair Elections Act. I like some of the new features that are included within the bill, such as the creation of a pre-writ period ceiling on party and advocacy advertising, tags on all advertising, and so on.

Then I shift in my brief to three concerns I have. The greatest disappointment for me is the failure to bring political parties under the provisions of the privacy acts in Canada and to provide a route to address privacy concerns through the Office of the Privacy Commissioner. This bill essentially says that the parties will be left to regulate themselves with respect to privacy practices. Not my preferred one, but a second-best solution would require the Privacy Commissioner, not Elections Canada, to give the parties' privacy policies and practices a Good Housekeeping seal of approval. On the second part of that concern, another option I would suggest is that annually the parties publish online a statement of what has gone on with respect to their privacy activities, including the education of their members and staff, and so on, on any privacy complaints that have come up.

My fourth point has to do with the flow of foreign money and foreign influence into Canadian elections. As I read the bill, and I'm not a lawyer, there appears to be a loophole in the bill that allows for the commingling of foreign and domestic funds, including the support to advocacy groups, third parties as they're called in the bill. I don't see any easy fix to this problem through legislation or regulation, but I note the provision in the bill for a prohibition on collusion. It may be over time, through the operation of the collusion clause, that precedents will develop that will restrict but probably not eliminate completely the potential for foreign influence in Canadian elections.

My fifth point and final concern has to do with the pre-writ period beginning on June 30. The point I'm making there in the brief is the need to align the timing of restrictions on partisan and advocacy advertising with the ban on government advertising that currently flows out of an administrative policy statement. It is not based on legislation. That ban requires the ads to stop 90 days before voting day. The two periods should be aligned so that you set up a situation where the government is, in effect, in a caretaker situation and any benefit that might come to the governing party from government advertising would be eliminated.

My final observation is that this bill should have been proceeded with much earlier, or an earlier version of a bill, perhaps. It has been left late.

● (1210)

I know the professionals at Elections Canada do their utmost to execute the provisions of the bill, but we have to get into the habit of treating these deadlines for planning an election more seriously.

Thank you very much. I look forward to questions.

The Chair: That was perfect timing too. Thank you.

Now we'll go to Glen Cheriton, President of Commoners' Publishing.

Mr. Glenn Cheriton (President, Commoners' Publishing): Thank you for this opportunity.

My presentation here is based on a complaint I made a number of years ago to Elections Canada with regard to involvement of Elections Canada and their staff in a publication which was put on their website and otherwise distributed. It's dated December 2005, so it occurred during a federal election campaign. It says that the document was prepared with the support of Elections Canada, and it has a list of the staff at Elections Canada who were involved in this publication.

My complaint is that it's talking about women's political equality, and I'm hoping to make this relevant to the current bill. One of the things they were asking for in this is a change of legislation and policy so that, under certain circumstances, men would be banned from running as members of Parliament. Elections Canada looked into my complaint, the actions of their staff, and the posting of this during an election campaign. They decided that this question, this issue, had not arisen during the election campaign, and had no relevance to this. In my opinion, it has been raised in every election campaign.

They also said that this was merely editorializing during an election campaign by Elections Canada staff and that there's no reason why they shouldn't be able to do it. Bringing this into relevance to the current bill, it seems to me that if Elections Canada is going to be deciding who is in the rules, then you have to have some mechanism for ensuring that Elections Canada and their staff also follow the rules.

I should point out that I attempted a number of years ago to make this exact presentation to this committee. I was told by five members of Parliament that I was right, that this was not the thing that Elections Canada should be doing, and that this was a violation of the law, the Canada Elections Act. I was also told that they would not present me in front of the committee because they feared that Elections Canada would pull their right to run in the next election.

It seems to me that I largely support these provisions of this bill. My concerns are, in this case, that you have Government of Canada money, through Status of Women, going into this publication, and money from Elections Canada going into supporting this issue, and yet these people are deciding themselves as to whether they're in violation of the rules.

This, I agree, is a bit of a conundrum. I'm certainly concerned about foreign money. My thinking is that the Government of Canada money, and Elections Canada money and staff, also should be considered as foreign money, and should not be used to influence elections and issues that are raised during that election.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Jean-Luc Cooke from the Green Party of Canada, who is a Member of the National Council.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke (Member of Council, National Office, Green Party of Canada): I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to address the bill. The Green Party of Canada is especially grateful for the time allotted to prepare for this appearance.

A good portion of this bill is not so much modernization but rather restoration of the Canada Elections Act pre-Harper, which is mostly good, but the central promise of no longer voting in a first past the post system is unfortunately absent. I will not be obtuse. This is a clear promise, clearly and unapologetically broken.

In consultations across the country, the majority of Canadians favoured reform and a form of proportional representation. It is regrettable that a government without a popular mandate gets to continue perpetuating a system that silences the voices of Canadians who are not represented in a so-called representative democracy.

Some important modernization changes have been taken, though, but the Green Party of Canada wonders whether the government has given Elections Canada sufficient time to update their technologies, their administrative processes, and to put in place training programs. After all, a quarter of a million Canadians work the polls on a general election. We are 15 months away from the 43rd general election and nothing has been put into law.

Improvements that are of particular note are the use of voter information cards as a piece of valid ID. This should speed up the voting process and improve accessibility. Allowing young people, 16- and 17-year-olds, to register is a good first step toward having them vote. Studies show that engagement in the voting process at an early age translates to lifelong voting behaviour. The Green Party commends you here, and would like to draw your attention to Ms. May's private member's Bill C-401.

This being said, there are two items I want to underscore as being insufficient.

First, the privacy provisions are inadequate. Political parties possess enormous amounts of data and personal information on Canadians, and they are currently exempt from most of the provisions under the Privacy Act. Moreover, in a day and age where politically motivated hacking is no longer a possibility but a reality, it is imperative that the parties work together to ensure that their information is safe. The big political parties, if hacked, could compromise the electoral system as a whole. Our democracy is run on trust and the big parties are currently the weakest link.

The Green Party urges the parties to coordinate their efforts informally, and that Bill C-76 contain provisions that are in keeping with Canada's Privacy Act.

Second, more needs to be done in curbing the influence of money in politics. Returning the per-vote allowance would lessen the influence of donors on politicians, and be more cost-efficient than the current 75% tax credit system. We all know the distorted effect that money and donors have on American democracy. So, at all costs, we should be avoiding these excesses that we see south of the border.

The Green Party suggests that we redefine the pre-writ period as starting the day after an election and ending when the writ is dropped in the following general election. Spending limits during this redefined pre-writ period should remain the same as they are and be indexed to inflation. Redefining this reflects the realities of what some have called the permanent campaign. There are only two periods in political advertising in reality, writ and pre-writ.

We need to set limits to the election process to avoid excesses, but also to ensure that citizens, political parties, and lawmakers alike focus on the business of good, democratic governance, and not being constantly distracted by the demands and, sometimes, fanfare of politics.

Thanks.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you all very much.

We'll go to Mr. Simms for the first round of questions.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Cooke, first of all, thanks for coming. Just a point of clarification, Bill C-401, is that the lowering of the voting age to 16? Is that the bill you're speaking of?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay. You just mentioned Bill C-401, and I'm not sure if you mentioned it to the other side. I just wanted to put that on the record.

When it comes to the preregistration of young people, there's a second element, too, which is getting people involved in Elections Canada, working with Elections Canada under the age of 18. How do you feel about that?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: We exist in a society with many different ages of majority. You need to be 16 years old before you can drive a car; 16 years old before you can enlist in the reserves; but 18 years before you can drink or vote. I find it an interesting dichotomy where you need to be older to be able to drink and vote than you do to enlist, to potentially fight and die in the name of your country.

These ages should probably be aligned just in principle. If you're old enough to vote, it makes sense that you're old enough to participate in the back-end mechanics of the electoral process. Participating and working with Elections Canada seems to make sense to me, if you're old enough to vote.

Mr. Scott Simms: The concept of the pre-writ period is something that your party agrees with, but you think it should be following that election; that's when the pre-writ period starts, the day after polling.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Right. It becomes a classification question.

The bill, as it currently presents, presents that there are three different times that election spending can fall into: writ, pre-writ, and none of the above. It seems to make sense to us that there should be only two categorizations: when a writ is dropped—basically during the writ period—and when it's not.

If there are no spending limits outside of—

Mr. Scott Simms: Obviously, you feel that the spending limit should be adjusted as such.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Well, on the amount of the spending limit, we can look at formulations. This becomes a bit more of the minutiae. In non-writ periods there should be a spending limit, and perhaps that spending limit should be adjusted to reflect the entire period outside of the writ period. This becomes more of a question of equations and formulas rather than principles. If there are no spending limits at all outside of a pre-writ period or a writ period, then that presents an opportunity for distortion of justice.

Mr. Scott Simms: That's for the much larger parties, you're saying.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: It's for the much larger parties or third party interest groups.

Mr. Scott Simms: Right, and those rules should be concurrent.

Do you feel that the laws regarding third party should be more in line with those regarding the candidates, the actual participants, the parties, the contestants?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I think it would be simpler not only for the voters but also for parties and everyone acting in an election process and exercising their right to express their opinions, if everyone had the same dates in mind, and everyone was operating from the same calendar. From this certain date—

Mr. Scott Simms: Do you mean with the same limits as well?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: On the question on limits, I'll defer to this panel, because from what I understand, and I'm not a constitutional expert, there are constitutional considerations for third party groups or individuals expressing their points of view versus the case for political parties, so—

● (1225)

Mr. Scott Simms: Should they be treated differently?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I am not a constitutional expert but from what I understand, there are implications for third party groups in that regard.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay. Thank you.

Professor Thomas—is it Professor or Doctor Thomas?

Dr. Paul Thomas: Professor is fine.

Mr. Scott Simms: Professor Thomas, thank you for your input. I just want to get your comments on the identification aspect of the upcoming election, or any election for that matter, of course, being the charter right that it is.

A lot of people would say that you need to produce a certain amount of ID that's acceptable in this day, and since most people have this type of ID, that should be acceptable, but should we provide more latitude for people who want to exercise their right to vote?

Dr. Paul Thomas: Yes, I like the idea of restoring the use of the VIC for purposes of voter identification at the polls, and I like the idea of vouching. I haven't seen persuasive evidence—I've seen almost no evidence—that people impersonate other voters or vote more than once. The studies done both here and elsewhere suggest that is not a widespread problem.

I think the whole premise should be to try to facilitate access to the polls and encourage people to get out to vote. It's the one democratic participation activity in which the majority of Canadians participate, and we should do our utmost to make it more supportive of that activity.

I like the idea, for example, of pre-registering young voters. In the United States, in those states where they've adopted such a practice, turnout rates in elections have gone up anywhere between 5% and 15%, and in—

Mr. Scott Simms: Is that in all jurisdictions or just in the United States?

Dr. Paul Thomas: That's in the United States. I think there are 15 states in which they have registration of young adults who are approaching the age to vote, and that's brought an increase in that voting segment of the population at the next election. People get into the habit of not voting. It's a bad habit to encourage.

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes. One of our former witnesses stated that the issue of preregistration should be accompanied by a more vigorous campaign by Elections Canada to promote to young voters. How do you feel about that?

Dr. Paul Thomas: The provision in the Fair Elections Act that narrowed considerably the mandate of the CEO to engage in outreach and educational activities was wrong, in my opinion.

There is a line that needs to be drawn. You can't try to target your appeals to particular segments of the voting populations—groups that might be described as marginal—and encourage them alone to get out to vote. It's not about the predisposition or the motivation to vote; it's about making them informed about the importance of voting as an activity within a healthy democracy.

Mr. Scott Simms: You think a caveat should be built into it, or maybe "caveat" is the wrong word, but certainly for Elections Canada, they must understand the point that they must not micro-target a particular part of the population when they do advocacy to encourage people to vote.

Dr. Paul Thomas: This debate was actually taken up in the U.K. when I did a background study for Elections Canada, and they tried to draw that line. It's not a bright line; it's a blurred line between encouraging the motivation to vote and informing people so they'd be inclined to vote.

It's across the board. In some cases, it may take more effort to reach certain marginal groups that historically have not turned out in great numbers. You don't exclude those groups and you may have to go to some extra effort, but it is a tricky area where the CEO and other leaders at Elections Canada have to be careful that they're not accused of a bias in encouraging some groups to come forward to vote when historically they have not been active.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you all for being here, or virtually here.

Mr. Cooke, I'll start with you. You made a statement at the very beginning of your opening remarks that I believe was dripping with sarcasm. Unfortunately, when the Hansard is viewed, sarcasm doesn't show up, so I want to give you a chance to make sure, if it was sarcasm, to clarify that, because it's obviously important. It does change the meaning of what you said.

You made the statement that you were especially appreciative of the amount of time you'd had to prepare for this. I assume that was a sarcastic statement.

● (1230)

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: It was a tongue-in-cheek bit of sarcasm. Obviously, I am here. I feel well enough prepared for the questions you'll ask, so let's continue.

Mr. Blake Richards: For the record, when were you actually asked to come for today?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I myself was brought into the loop a little over 28 hours ago.

Mr. Blake Richards: The question that flows from that is, at this point, at least, we're hoping that certainly the government is going to allow more time for this to be looked at properly and actually hear from Canadians who need to be heard from, and so on, and do this properly. At this point in time, they're trying to consider this week, the one week of study that's being done here, enough to hear properly on a bill of this magnitude. Would you agree? Do you think that's enough time, or do you think there needs to be more time taken to look at something this serious and important?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: In my area of work, which is more private sector than public, there's always a question of risk versus reward. Is the risk of further delaying the execution of this bill worth the reward of ironing out some of the kinks or problems within the bill itself?

The Green Party of Canada would rather see this bill in force for the next general election than it not in force with modification. Yes, there are many things we would like to see that would be better. There are problems with this bill that need to be kept in mind.

Mr. Blake Richards: Having heard you say that, I understand your position, although my understanding is that Elections Canada is already putting together a plan to implement this. Trying to force this through in a matter of a week or two as compared to taking the time that's necessary probably doesn't really prevent it from being in place for the next election as a result of that, and you've mentioned yourself here that you do think there are some concerns in it that need to be addressed.

Wouldn't it be incumbent upon us to take some time to do that, if Elections Canada actually is putting together an implementation plan and could get this in place?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Again, it becomes risk-reward. If some of the modifications don't require huge administrative overhaul within Elections Canada, I would say that statement is accurate. If it requires significant changes to how Elections Canada is operating and the assumptions they're running on today, I would say the risk is not appropriate.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Unfortunately, the burden of that decision falls on you.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, of course.

Professor Thomas, you mentioned in your opening remarks, in talking about the pre-writ period, something on which I certainly agree with you: the idea you mentioned of the need to look at harmonizing the period of time in which there is a ban on government advertising with the same period of time that there are restrictions put on the political parties.

I wonder what your thoughts are, though, under that same principle, on the idea of looking at ministerial travel as well. Obviously you can see, when we're talking about travel of ministers or the prime minister in that time, maybe they're making government announcements, which could be intended to entice voters to support them because of something they're announcing or highlighting that they've done as a government. We've seen that in byelections with this government already.

What are your thoughts on that? Should that be restricted in the same period of time, as well?

Dr. Paul Thomas: Yes. The U.K. has gone with the idea of a caretaker period, where, as you approach election day, the government has to stop certain types of activities that may work to their partisan advantage. There may be a whole host of things. Travel may be among them, especially if travel involves high-profile announcements that redound to the credit of the prime minister and so on.

We worked hard to try and create a more equal playing field when the government controls the public service and the spending authority that comes with it, and so on.

I think we're going to codify more and more of these rules. We will have to go down a list of possible things that might or might not be able to happen during that period. You can't go back too far. Going back to June 30, some people have said that all you're going to do with that deadline is create a binge of advertising before that date, so let's go back further; let's go back, like the U.K. says, a year. Well, that's too long to put the government on hold, where it can't put out messages. I know there are provisions for emergency messages from government and advertising from government, but it's a tricky balancing act here.

This balance in the bill is not quite right. It shouldn't create this interval of time where the government has the advantage.

● (1235)

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that.

The other thing I want to touch on with you briefly is something I wanted to ask one of our witnesses earlier, but we were cut off when the government forced a vote. It was a group that represents youth, Citoyenneté jeunesse, and I had wanted to ask them about ID. You mentioned ID as well, so I will ask you the question.

This is with respect to the educational components of Elections Canada. One of the things I think they haven't done a very good job of, and I would like to see them do a better job of—but I wanted to see if you would share my opinion—is informing people of the logistics of voting. In other words, there are a lot of different IDs that are available. You're advocating bringing back the idea of a voter information card, but there are 39 forms that exist now. I think a lot of people aren't aware of what the options are and maybe show up at the polls without one of those pieces because they don't realize they need to bring it.

I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this, because even the Canadian Federation of Students indicated to us when they were here recently that they had to engage in a campaign themselves to inform young people about these options. I guess they felt Elections Canada wasn't doing a good enough job.

Do you think Elections Canada could do a better job of informing people about the options they have available to them?

Dr. Paul Thomas: I think the professionals at Elections Canada would be the first to admit they can improve in that area, and they are making plans to do that in the next election. Voting locations on campus preceded by advertising and making people aware of the requirements to cast a vote, all of that has to go on. We know at that point in the life of a young adult, they are distracted by lots of other things, so it's important to make an extra effort to get out there.

Elections Canada did that, with some considerable effect in the last election, in indigenous communities where previously they were under-represented in terms of their messaging about the importance of voting.

I concur with your general principle. I also think Elections Canada is probably on top of it.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we will go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the witnesses here and to our friend from Manitoba.

I will start with you, Professor Thomas. I'm getting a theme with this bill. When we talk to experts and folks from different fields, there are two clear aspects of the bill.

One is fixing some of what I would call "damage done" by the previous government in terms of enfranchisement, allowing the voter ID cards, allowing vouching, and whatnot. All of that was introduced 18 months ago in a bill.

The second part of the bill is more ambitious, I suppose, in trying to deal with things like third party financing, foreign influence, social media, and those kinds of components.

Have I described the legislation satisfactorily, in your mind?

Dr. Paul Thomas: Yes. I think the bill that arose out of the previous election and former CEO Marc Mayrand's report could have been dealt with a long time ago. The government's management of this file has been very poor, in my opinion. If that sits on the Order Paper for 18 months, it says something about the commitment of the government to get this moving ahead, and we have had the holdup with the appointment of a permanent CEO.

I think it's unfortunate now. We have a 350-page document and we're trying to understand all the provisions and the intersections and interactions of those provisions. It's very tricky to read. I do my best. I used the search engine on my PDF to try and find the parts I really need to know something about. It's not an easy task, and I label myself some kind of expert.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We do, too.

I'm starting to believe that, as my grandmother used to say, a lack of planning on your part doesn't make for a crisis on mine. I was eight years old at the time, but she had a point that still stays with me today when I look at this bill. With days to study it, virtually every committee meeting we've had has been interrupted by votes. We've rarely gone through an entire cycle, yet I, too, am supporting some of what you've said here. I'm in support of some of what I'll call the enfranchisement pieces of the bill.

There are a number of questions outstanding, particularly around privacy, the loophole you talked about in commingling, and some of the pre-writ conversations we've had as to whether they're fair between the government and non-government parties.

I'm wondering if the bill needs to be split. I'm wondering if we need to expedite the pieces that there has been some dispute about but more of a consensus around—the Bill C-33 components. There have been a lot of questions about the second part, the third party, the commingling loophole, and the lack of privacy restrictions of parties. What do you think of that suggestion?

● (1240)

Dr. Paul Thomas: We're trying to do a great deal in this bill. Traditionally, reform to election law has been done incrementally, ideally on the basis of as much all-party consensus as possible.

In recent years, we've had partisan entanglements over election law reforms, because maybe we've tried to do too much, too sweeping changes, and so on. Also maybe something to think about is whether this committee, which does a number of good things—I really admire the membership of this committee for the work they do. Maybe election law is something that should be put out to a special committee in those years after the Chief Electoral Officer files his annual report.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I only hesitate because Ms. Sahota, Mr. Reid, and I sat on one of those special committees, and we spent a lot of time and money. There were some results, but not many, as Mr. Cooke has pointed out.

Dr. Paul Thomas: Yes, I know, but that—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'm running out of time. I'm not keeping this tight enough.

You see this is a restoration bill, Mr. Cooke, in part. The inadequacy around privacy.... The threat is that if this bill goes ahead as written, unamended—with respect to the lack of consent, oversight, and verification, which was once described by a former chief electoral officer as the wild west—we just don't have any rules around privacy and how parties handle the personal information of Canadians.

Do we pass this bill with those provisions as they are right now? How can we assure Canadians that their data is acquired and held with any type of security?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: In June 2011, the Conservative Party of Canada was hacked. Their donor database, with addresses and email addresses, was exposed. This has happened—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Was this the robocall scandal?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: No, this is the "hash brown" scandal. I'm trying to remember the name of the hacker. It's something unpronounceable.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: This has happened. I work in engineering. The saying goes that everything has a mean time to failure. Everything will eventually break. That means the security of your party's systems, my party's systems, and all the party systems will eventually be broken into. It's just a matter of statistics. What are the procedures in place to make sure that all our parties are adhering to the best standards? I think the answer is that the Privacy Commissioner needs to have mandates to go in and review us.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I think it was you—I'll say it's you for now—who offered something novel, where there would be some sort of gold seal, or a seal of approval from the Privacy Commissioner, that would work with each party vying for seats in an election. At some point prior to election day—prior to the writ, hopefully—we would be able to say, "I've worked with the Green Party. I've worked with the Liberals. I've worked with the Conservatives. Here's the grade. These folks will handle your data securely and safely."

I would imagine for some voters, at least, that would be a factor in how they cast their vote.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: In almost every other organization that voters and Canadians interact with that have to meet privacy laws, there are privacy risk assessments. An external auditor would come in and say, "Here are some deficiencies that we'd like you to address. Here are some others that we think are adequate." A lead time is given for that organization to meet those requirements. This is how the banks, telephone companies, everyone deals with private data.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The government has argued that those were different. They were special.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Most Canadians don't see it that way.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: What? I'm hurt by that assessment.

I put the same question to you. There are aspects of this bill that you've agreed with, what I'll call the enfranchisement components. There are others that either have problems, or raise more questions than we have answers to right now. What do you think the government should do with this bill, with days left on the spring calendar, and with Elections Canada saying they needed a bill passed by May 1?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: The time allocation approach is unfortunate.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It sure is.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: As you said, planning.... If this were started further ahead, if the electoral reform special committee had produced better results, perhaps people would feel better. Again it's risk-reward. I would say we need to have this passed—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: —really soon.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: The whole thing? It's a tough decision. I'll withhold my comment on that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

Who do we have next here? Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You were talking about technology a few minutes ago. Basically, I was in technology before as well. What are the limits of the role of technology in elections, in your view?

● (1245)

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I'll speak as a voter, not only as a member of a political party. Technology is useful because we want to have results quickly and things done efficiently, but the maintaining of the paper ballot is also vital. If ever there's any doubt, any question, into the legitimacy of any election, Canadians want to know there's a paper trail and that everyone and their grandmother can connect the dots and actually count up the results. I think that is vital.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Especially your grandmother....

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Especially my grandmother....

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I forget who it was, but I think a couple of you mentioned it. We were talking about lowering the voting age as opposed to just the registration age. Is that something you're interested in seeing?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Yes. Elizabeth May has put forward a private member's bill to do precisely that. We see it as very useful. Think back to when you were 16 years old, about to graduate from high school before the next federal election. To cast your vote that first time, before you left home, before you found a career or went off and had an education, perhaps in another town, to be part of the democratic process ahead of that, would incentivize you just psychologically, while you were at university or settling into your first apartment, to go and vote again. I think that would be vital.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think I had already done three campaigns by the time I was 16, so I can relate to that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: David, you're special.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Well, I watched CPAC as soon as it came on the air when I was a teenager, so there you go.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: As I said, you're special.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If we reduce the voting age, if we were to go down that road, should the age of candidates also be reduced?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I think it's actually in the Constitution, if I'm not incorrect, that anyone who is eligible to vote is eligible to run.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: So we'd be fine with lowering the candidate age to 16 as well at that point or—

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I can't see disconnecting them as being just.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's fair.

Is 16 the right age?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: What is the right age is a difficult question to ask. I imagine some of us would say sarcastically that we know full-grown adults who perhaps shouldn't vote because they have not gone through the effort to get informed on the electoral process. You can't write a test to pass whether or not someone should be eligible to vote. We have to pick an age, and if we pick an age where someone's old enough to enlist in the reserves, in the military, and drive a vehicle that could kill somebody, I think they've shown enough maturity that they should be able to vote.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: One would hope in any case.

We also talked about curbing the influence of money in elections, which I agree with, quite frankly. It's a little frustrating to me, and I've said this in PMB debate before, that somebody who gives $100 and doesn't have any income pays $100, and somebody who gives $100 and has a lot of income gets $25. It's another problem to solve in a PMB somewhere I suspect.

When I talk to colleagues about our putting fundraising limits, I always get these questions. What about volunteers? How do we limit volunteers? How do you quantify that?

How do we quantify it?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Personally, I think quantifying volunteering is not in the interests of democracy, let alone putting a limit on how much personal time someone wants to put into an election. If you really have to break it down, there are theories of economics that say the only currency that matters is time, because that's the one thing we all have an equal amount of. If a political party has more volunteers, then ostensibly it's because they are able to motivate more people to their cause. That is the true test of someone who has the support of the people who are electing them.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Have you ever—and this is for all three witnesses—witnessed voter fraud to do with VIC's, voter information cards?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: I would have to say I have.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Can you describe it for us?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: I was a DRO and saw people coming in with voter identification cards, and on subsequent requests for further identification it was clear they were a different person. In some cases they were eligible to vote; in other cases it was a problem, shall we say.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How often did you see this?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: It was quite rare. I think the greater problem was more confusion, that people were voting at the wrong place or there were problems in getting them to vote. This was a pretty minor problem, but it has happened. I've seen it.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is it a big enough problem that 160,000 people should lose the right to vote to protect it?

● (1250)

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: That's deeply ironic because the other point I was making with Elections Canada was that they had failed to look into the largest loss of the right to vote, which was 170,000 Canadian men during the unemployment relief camps, and they were not putting that in their history.

I think you should err on the side of participation. Yes, I would like to include that, but the problem I have is the deferential inclusion of some groups and the exclusion, the ignoring, of others. If you're concerned about the 160,000, you should also be concerned about the 170,000 who lost the right to vote, in my opinion.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When was that?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: This was between 1930 and 1936. Because they were put into unemployment relief camps they lost their right to vote. Essentially, they were under military command so they lost their right to medical care. If you look at Canada's social services you can see all these things—unemployment relief, worker's compensation, wages for work—and they were looking for the right to vote.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I only have a few seconds left. Who else didn't have the right to vote in 1936?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: Natives, women in Quebec....

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Are these examples relevant to the current act?

Mr. Glenn Cheriton: They are relevant in the sense of losing the right to vote, and I believe you raised that issue. Part of the reason I think we should learn from the past is so we don't repeat the mistakes of the past.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: So we don't take away the right to vote of 170,000 people today. I agree with that. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

We will now move to Mr. Reid for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Before I ask any questions, I want to make a little editorial.

The fundamental issue that relates to people being able to vote without identification, the various mechanisms that have been provided, such as the use of the voter information card and so on, all comes down to the question ultimately of whether people have the right to vote. Some people turn up with ID—I've done it myself—who sometimes don't have time to get back. Sometimes, maybe in rarer cases, they don't have ID and you don't want to deprive those people of the right to vote. On the other hand, if enough people turn up to vote fraudulently, then you can have everybody in that riding effectively deprived of their franchise. That is not a small thing. The pretense that we don't have, and have not had, fraudulent voting in the country is just laughable.

I know when we were debating this stuff during the last minority government, I was contacted by the wife of a Liberal candidate, a former Liberal MP from downtown Toronto, who argued that her husband had been effectively deprived of his elected office due to fraudulent NDP voting. Was that true? I don't know, but it was plausible enough that she was willing to say this to me. These things have to be taken seriously.

There is a way it could be resolved. I suggested it to the minister. It's practised in other countries, including respectable democracies like the United States of America, and that is provisional balloting. You vote when you don't have ID. I'd say, "I am Scott Reid." They'd take my word for it. They'd put my ballot into an anonymizing envelope, just like a vote that's been cast by mail. That gets dropped into a second envelope, which I'd sign. Later on they'd verify whether or not I really am who I said I was. We add up those ballots, if it's necessary, because the number of ballots outweighs the number of the margin of victory.

I merely throw that out. That would resolve this entire problem. It didn't make it into the bill, and I regret that.

However, I have a separate question on an entirely different issue for you, Mr. Cooke. It is on the question of the leaders' debates. As you know, a debates commission is being set up, not under this bill or indeed under any bill, but under government auspices. There is a very good chance that it will set up leaders' debates from which the leader of your party will be excluded. Alternatively, they may include the leader of your party then cut off someone else, such as the leader of the Bloc. This creates an inherent problem.

I have no clever solution for the problem of the fact that there's no clear division between the major parties and the parties that are not major. Can I get your thoughts on that?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: We've discussed through this bill and through many bills prior all the different rules around elections: spending, advertising, whether the government can advertise, third parties, and political parties, yet still there are no rules on governing the leaders debate. All of us can recognize that the leaders debate is possibly the most pivotal moment in any writ period, but it is not governed by election law. This is a curiosity to the point of...it's almost absurd, really.

The Green Party would like to see some rule, any rule, saying who should be at the leaders debates.

● (1255)

Mr. Scott Reid: I guess you don't mean literally any rule because it's easy to imagine a rule that says we cut off the line after the three major parties and the Greens are out, or maybe you do accept that. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I think the Green Party would be satisfied with any rule that was clear. Let's say the rule was that a political party has to have at least 5% of the national vote to be at the next leaders debate. I think the Green Party would be prepared to accept that because now that 5% becomes the high-water mark we need to reach.

Mr. Scott Reid: What was the per cent you got?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: The last time? I can't recall.

Mr. Scott Reid: You know why I'm asking that, right?

This is one of the fundamental problems we had. In the Figueroa case before the Supreme Court, Mr. Figueroa was challenging a law which said that you had to have contested a certain number of seats in the last election in order to qualify for certain rights in this election, which of course was designed to freeze out new parties that had widespread support. It was introduced by the Chrétien government after the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois came out of nowhere. It was clearly meant to ensure that couldn't happen again.

The court ruled, I think rightly, that trying to quash populist movements like the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois is unconstitutional, a violation of section 3. Do you see what I'm getting at? Isn't the 5% number based on the previous election also essentially saying that preferences that haven't been expressed for four years are somehow less worthy than preferences that are four years old or more?

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Yes and no. Let's say the criteria was 2%. By the way, the Green Party would still be the last party that meets that criteria.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: I think even at 1% we'd still be the only one to qualify.

Mr. Scott Reid: There's the Bloc.

Mr. Jean-Luc Cooke: Right, my apologies.

I think it has to be fair that some kind of criteria should be established, and I think that democracy and an electoral system need to be resilient enough to say if there is a movement or a party that is coming forward that is getting a lot of populist interest...that to go from zero to a national leaders debate within less than one election cycle, is probably not healthy for our democracy, but within less than two election cycles, so step it back. Let's say we call it the Purple Party. It gets 4% somehow in the next federal election, then by the next leaders debate after that, they would potentially have a seat at the leaders debate. I think that would be reasonable.

Mr. Scott Reid: I don't agree with you, but I did ask for your opinion, so thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

We'll finish off with Ms. Tassi.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking each of you for your time and your testimony today.

Professor Thomas, I'm going to begin with you. I appreciate your compliment to the work of the procedure and House affairs committee. I'm not looking for more compliments but to just to make you aware about our work with respect to elections, the CEO did appear before this committee with his report, and we spent 22 meetings with that report. Each meeting is an average of two hours.

In addition to that, we'll have had by the end of this week, by my calculations, about 30 hours of testimony. The last two days have been a little more difficult because we've had votes, which is just a function of this place. I just wanted to let you know of the time that we've spent on this.

You mentioned the comment, and it came out in the CEO's report with respect to some of the changes that have been made in this legislation. The VIC and the vouching are two, as well as the preregistration of young voters, both of which I believe you support. You see them as good.

Are there other provisions in this bill that you are also very pleased to see and that you think are important to implement before the next election?

Dr. Paul Thomas: Yes. If you read my brief, you'll see that my compliments go beyond simply what I have said today.

I recognize that you did an extensive review and three reports and heard from the acting CEO and maybe Mr. Mayrand before that, so I know you've studied this. That's why I thought the work shouldn't be swamped by the late arrival of this bill. It has complicated things; we should have had action before this. That's my opinion.

Yes, there are other things in the bill that I like. I like the fact that the commissioner is now being moved back inside the administrative framework of Elections Canada. I mentioned already the educational mandate that the CEO should have. That's important work to do to create a healthy and vibrant democracy.

There are lots of other things. There are lots of nuts and bolts of election management that go into this bill. One thing I'm saying in my main theme is that we have to move away from the tradition of highly detailed, prescriptive legislation. In this dynamic world we live in, when we have these technological changes and changing political practice, we have to give more autonomy and scope to improvise on the part of Elections Canada—as I said, a diverse toolkit of instruments that they can use.

I like the idea, for example, that no longer are you going to have to take someone who violates elections spending rules to court. That costs time and money. We have to find a better way. We have compliance agreements now. Now there's this whole toolkit that has to be built up.

When I did studies in the past, I noted that the U.K. election commissioner has far more authority to engage in the management of this process. You're doing, as I said, a number of good things in this bill in that direction, such as being able to hire half the staff before the date closes when the parties can nominate returning officers. That's a step forward, especially in today's context.

Yes, we're going in the right direction. I just think that longer term there needs to be a broad grant of statutory authority and delegated regulatory power. That's where the modern election agency needs to be.

● (1300)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Mr. Chair, do we have a copy of this report? I don't have the paper in front of me.

The Chair: Do you mean of his report?

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Yes.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): Yes. We have to get it back from translation, but I expect it back very shortly.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay.

Mr. Thomas, just so that you know, we don't have your submission in front of us. We're waiting for translation.

Dr. Paul Thomas: It will help cure your insomnia.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: I was very interested in your comments with respect to targeting. I know it's difficult, but I wonder whether you can give me a little bit of clarification on it.

You spoke about the importance of having certain groups, for example, young people and those with disabilities. We want to encourage voter participation and turnout, but you also cautioned against this targeting. There's not much time left now. Could you briefly summarize how you would bridge this and get increased voter participation without going so far as to target in terms that you think are not acceptable?

Dr. Paul Thomas: I didn't say that very well. Let me clarify.

Elections Canada can't get into the business of exhorting people to get out and vote. They can tell them what the requirements for voting are, how to vote, and the convenience factor about alternative ways of voting, such as voting from the home, for example. I think a missing ingredient in this bill is enabling long-term care facility staff to vouch for residents within their facilities. That kind of thing goes on, and it has to.

I think Elections Canada would entangle itself in controversy if it said that its job is to bring up the turnout among young Canadians. Political parties will see that as favouring some parties and not others. It therefore has to be across the board, but as I said, the logistics of doing it will take some extra effort with some segments of the voting population.

It's a tricky line to draw.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This was another great panel. Thank you all for coming and providing some new perspectives for us. We really appreciate it.

Turning to committee business, right after QP we have three panels. The first two have four witnesses each, and the last panel, from 5:30 to 6:30, is with Twitter and Facebook, which is very exciting.

Then we don't have anything for Monday on the schedule at the moment. We have to do some committee business some time, so I could suggest Monday afternoon, if no one has any other suggestions, because Nathan can't be here Monday morning.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Not right now, though, because I have a school waiting for me in Centre Block. I don't want to do it right now.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have a school waiting for me, too.

An hon. member: Are there going to be votes?

● (1305)

The Chair: Not that I know of.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I was told that there were votes coming up after QP. Maybe I got that wrong.

The Chair: At 3:30, we're back here for three panels.

In this room, right, Mr. Clerk?

The Clerk: No. We're in Room 430.

The Chair: We're in another room in this building when we come back.

Scott, Monday afternoon for committee business...?

Mr. Scott Simms: Sure.

The Chair: On Monday afternoon after QP, we will have committee business.

We're in Room 430 this afternoon.

The meeting is adjourned.

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